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TSOEDE BIRTH AND THE SURROUNDING MYTH: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF NUPE TRADITIONAL ORIGIN

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Abstract

The confluence of the Niger and Benue has for long been a focal area of migrations, commerce and conquests, which have set up cultural cross contact of many kinds. The Igala, the Nupe, the Jukun and the Fulani have at various times conquered large parts of the region and these wars have left deep impressions on the institutions of the peoples. Most of the ethnic groups of the Niger Benue confluence area speak Kwa languages. But there has been great terminological confusion, with reference to languages and ethnic groups, especially as it relates to the Nupe people. The paper provides an insight into the historical origin of the Nupe people of Nigeria. It tries to establish the historical origin in connection with Tsoede factor. The paper further sheds light on the Nupe kingship structure. Furthermore, the Nupe society has been fully organized with the integration of the Fulani rulers and natives who shared other traditional titles. In the last century, Nupe people have come of age with some of the Nupe sons and daughters that have made remarkable contributions to nation building. The paper provides such a unique picture of the Nupe people from the perspectives of language tone, body marks, occupation, tourist attractions, dressing, foods, festivals, religion, wise sayings, and elaborate description of marriage in Nupe culture which is a significant cultural practice. The paper attempts to add to existing literature for the benefit of future generation of Nupe extraction and others who might want to dig into the historical origin of the Nupes.

Keywords: Tsoede, Birth, Myth, Origin, Nupe

Introduction

Today many people perceive that the term 'Nupe' applies to only a clearly defined linguistic group, speaking Nupe as their first or mother tongue found mainly in the present day Niger, Kwara, Kogi, Nassarawa states and part of Federal Capital Territory Abuja. Of all these areas, the present Emirates of Bida, Agaie and Lapai collectively formed what used to be referred to as the central Nupe land, or the heart of Nupe land, which was the largest concentration of Nupe people.[1]

Despite the common language, the Nupe were divided into subgroups which include the Bini, Kusopa, Kyadya, Batachi, Chekpan, the Ebangi, Gbedegi, and Ebe, among others believes that the Nupe language is further divided into several dialects. He identifies such dialects as Dibo, Ebe, Bassange and Kupa. However, the political and cultural prominence of Nupe, became more noticed and attractive to especially foreign writers, with the emergence of a mythical charter called Tsoede or Edegi, generally regarded as the founder of Nupe kingdom between 15th and 16th centuries A.D[2]. But in the absence of clear evidence, all that can be said for now will be more of speculation than a definite historical fact. However, our speculation is premised on the fact that human habitation has been known to have existed in the Middle Niger region, where Nupeland is situated from ancient times. Like Ukwedeh[3]posits, Africa, like the most of humanity, exists as people and live in polities. In all human settlements or organizations no matter how remote, evolution of political, economic and social- cultural practices for their sustenance and survival cannot be ruled out.[4]According to Obayemi, '' accepting the presence of people in the area under discussion, it is clear that center of local authorities were emerging in the area under discussion, most probably, along the banks of rivers Niger and Kaduna and

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strategic places in the hinterland. What, however, is known to us is the efforts of such practices in the very remote period. It is most probable however, that authorities were centered on powerful political and religious figures or lineage heads who command respect and ability to rally people around them due to their charismatic prowess. The political situation in pre- and –Bini confederacy periods in Nupe land may not be irrelevant and significantly dissimilar to those of Kano and Katsina prior to,or during the *Sarauta* system. It is argued by Forde, that the Nupe kingdom was according to their traditions, founded by their cultural hero, Tsoede or Edegi, born, according to the genealogies of the Nupe kings, early in the 15th centuries when the Nupe grouped in various small chieftaincies subject to the Ata of Igala at Idah, to whom, an annual tribute of slaves traditionally, sister's son had to be paid.[5]

Land and People

It is argued that the Middle Niger basin formed the earliest homeland of the Nupe, likewise the Benue River axis inhabited the Igala people. This may have been made possible by the tributaries and distributaries as well as other favourable environmental features, which are said to have been major factors for continuous human habitation and growth of civilization along the banks and confluence of the rivers long before the emergence of Tsoede in Nupeland.

The land area occupied by the Nupe falls within the low basins of the River Niger and between 9 '30' and 8 '30' north latitude. These cover the land area of about eleven thousand and two hundred square kilometers (11,200 59km).[6] One outstanding feature of the physical geography of Nupeland is that the river Niger traverses its length dividing it into almost equal parts. The Nupe country is low lying and undulating, not more than 200ft above sea level in most parts. A few ridges of rocky hills and some flat-topped hillocks rise above the plain; the highest of these are not more than 800ft above sea level. On the banks of the Niger there are stretches of thick river rain forest alternating with shrubs and low bushes[7]. A line drawn from Leaba, on the Niger, eastward to Kata-eregi marks the northern boundary of Nupeland, another line drawn eastward from Shari (or Tsaragi) to Abugi and to Niger south of baro, the southern boundary

The Niger flowing almost straight north south between Leaba and Jebba, divides Nupe country from Yoruba in the west, the slowly rising country, east of Lapai and Gidi, slopping upwards towards the hills of Gbari country forms the eastern boundary of Nupe.[8]Despite the common language, it is worthy of note to reiterate the fact that the Nupe were divided into several sub-groups, each of which comprised territorial and cultural units in most cases, identifiable by its economic pursuits. These included Bini, the Kyadya, the Batachi, the Chekpan, the Ebangi, the Kusopachi, the Gbedegi, the Ebe and the Dibo or the Zhitako.[9]

The population figure of the Nupe is difficult to come by for several reasons. Since the advent of colonial administration, the Nupe have never been placed, collectively under one single administrative unit. Hence, various censuses conducted by different authorities at different times, cannot give reliable figure for the Nupe as a whole.

The historical geography of the area, which constituted the home lands of the Nupe has been fairly well described. Two aspects of the physical geography of the areas dominates all others, these are the lowness of the land and the abundance of the rivers. The land was, with a few notable exceptions, consistently of low relief, most of it being no more than 60 meters above sea level.[7]The geographical position of Nupe country makes it a typical area of transition from the southern forest belt to the arid savannah of the north. Narrow strips and patches of thick rain forest-like vegetation accompany river valleys and water courses but in the inland, we find a country of thin forest, shrub and orchard bush"[10] alternating with beautiful open park-land, such as around Bida and Agaie, where intensive cultivation has cleared bush and shrubs. Nupeland has pure water and a much more fertile land, the law broken hills of Nupe are ferruginous, and on their slope, iron ore is mined by the natives.

The rich and varied system of cultivation reflects already a standard of civilization, technical achievement and initiatives of a people which has learned to master its environment. Nupe, lower lying than any of the neighboring district, with its two big rivers, their dry, blazing sand-banks in the dry season, and their swamps in the rains, is one of the hottest and at the same time most humid districts in Nigeria. Particularly the presence of rivers Niger and Kaduna in Nupeland made it possible for the evolution of early civilization and state formulation, especially along river bank.[11]

Origin of the Nupe People

The precise origin of peoples and societies in the Nigerian area is a complex or problematic question. According to Atanda,"the origin of the people in any society is a problem which inevitably confronts the historian in or of that society". Hence, (as we have observed briefly earlier), the issues concerning the history

of the Nupe land has continued to be shrouded in mystery. Therefore, one of the most difficult and inconclusive aspects of their history is yet the inability of historians and researchers alike to determine a universally acceptable and incontrovertible theory of the origin the Nupe. Central tradition and hypothesis exploit about the origin of the Nupe speaking people. In the Palmer papers[12] it was asserted that the Nupe occupied the areas of Katsina and were during the time of Sarkin Katsina Korau (1445-1495) driven southwards to the area they now occupied in contradictory manner, Palmer also claimed that the Nupes came from the Zaria-Karashi region and were part of the people he called Apa, which he said included the Kwararofa Jukun and the Igala. The area of Idah, Wukari and Bussa, according to palmer belonged to the Apa satates of the Kwararafa, Igala and Igbira.

Also, in the translation of Infaqal-Maisur by Arnett, it is stated that the inhabitants of Nupe are of Katsina origin and also a mixture of the Kanawa and Zagagawa[13]. Both northern and southern origins have also been given for the Nupe people, according to Clapperton. "The people of Nupe came originally from Katsina and their prince Thoodyar (Tsoede) from Atagher i.e. (Idah)".[14]

He also recorded that the Nupe came from Benin or (Takra). The people in the area of the Gbako and Kaduna rivers migrated in the pre-historic times. According to Clapperton from Benin through the area of Idah:[15] Obayemi argued that the Bini came to their present location around Tafien, Doko, Nupeko etc. up river with their leader Jegu or Jiya where they met a giant race of people called Epazhi before the evolution of central political authority in Nupe [16]. Some other traditions have it that the Nupe groups came into their present area from the Nubian area of the Sudan and occupied their present location in the pre historic period.

Another account speaks of Nupe-speaking people being resident in the middle Niger region for over a millennium before the 19th century. Though detail of pre-Tsoede polities in Nupeland may not be elaborately available to us, our speculations may be premised on the fact that human habitation has been known to have existed in the middle Niger region, where Nupe is situated.[17]

But it is clear from the form taken by Igala oral tradition that in the past, the hereditary aspect of political authority was the major focus of interest and that the clan system was seen as providing the basic framework of government and administration. This difference is one of emphasis and does not involve a conflict principle. Igala clans are usually localized and the rights that they possess in land make up a major provision of their corporate functions. But although, the territorial sphere formed a major dimension of clan consciousness and clan inter relations; the clan system existed in its own right as a framework within which political authority was delegated among different clans.

Tsoede Birth and the Surrounding Myth

One of the most important personalities associated with Nupe history was Tsoede or Edegi. This personality has been given much emphasis by traditions and 19th and 20th century European writers, Christian missionaries and later colonial administrators. Their works have given impression that there had never been Nupe history prior to the emergence of Tsoede. Both Ndagi and Obayemi lament this erroneous view. According to the latter…

> *The overwhelming belief and commitment to the Tsoede factor in the history of Nupe has enjoyed political and cultural supremacy so much that it has obscured the identification insight and study of the pre-Tsoede Nupe history.*[18]

In discussing the foundation of Nupe kingdom therefore the personality of Tsoede occupies a commanding position. Our understanding of this phenomenon becomes imperative to enable us re- examine the myth or historicity surrounding Tsoede in the early history of Nupeland, particularly with regard to its relationship with Igala land and other neighbor's in general. Different names have been assigned to Tsoede. Clapperton calls him "Thoodyer", Crowther "Shorgede" Baikie names him "Tsado" while Frobenius calls him ' Edegi or Ededi[19]. For the purpose of clarity we have adopted in this work the most popular name Tsoede.

A number of erroneous accounts are said to have existed on the myth surrounding the birth, formative years and the emergence of Tsoede as the founder of Nupe kingdom.[20] Due to the problem of documented records and that of chronology, characteristic of early periods, it is hardly possible to incontrovertibly determine Tsoede's date of birth. There are however conflicting suggestions that put his birth at Nku in 1429, 1452 and 1463. Another source puts Tsoede's death in 1591 after having lived for 120 or 128 years. Taking this to be correct, then, Tsoede must have been born in 1463 or 1471- the former[21], corresponding with one of the dates mentioned above. In the absence of any agreeable and acceptable date for Tsoede's birth, it will be historically safe for us to conclude that he was born of a Nupe woman in the 15th century at Nku- one of the original Bini settlement in Nupeland.

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As for Tsoede's parents, most traditions, with one or two exceptions, linked his father to prince Ayangba the son to the 3rd or 4thAttah of Igala land called Idoko[22]. Ayangba used to travel to *Kin* Nupe on hunting and magical expedition. It was during one of such expeditions that he was said to have got married to an Nku princess called Mama- one of the daughters of Etsu Nku, the king of Nku, called Zubairu Gana[23]. Prince Ayangba had to travel back to Idah on hearing about the sickness of his father, Idoko. He left behind his pregnant wife at Nku to whom he gave a charm and an identification mark (a piece of red cloth) to hang on the child whenever it was born, so goes the tradition.

On the death of Attah Idoko, Ayangba became his successor at Idah. It had been the traditional practice that annual tribute in the form of slaves would be sent to Idah from subject areas including Nupe land. At the age of thirty years, Tsoede, together with others happened to be among the tribute sent to Idah from Nupe. On getting there, the Attah, the acclaimed father, recognized his son Tsoede who was said to have been singled out for special favour to the jealousy and dislike of other half-brothers[24]. Tsoede is reported to have performed wonders and magical feats to save his father from sickness and imminent defeat of Igala land by the Jukun, who were at war with each other. One of the achievements that the tradition ascribed to Tsoede was his bravery of catching a bunch of thorny palm fruit. He is said to have sustained some injuries including the cutting and splitting of his upper lips known in Nupe as Tsoede.[25]

In addition to some other injuries and scars on his stomach and cheeks. Since that incident, any child with a split upper lip in Nupe land is called Tsoede. To a very large extent people born within the royal nobility, particularly section of Nupe – Patigi, is given bold tribal marks on one of their cheeks Eyesa and chin /jaw called Nungbeka. This to identify them as descendants of the eclipsed Tsoede ruling dynasty which was regenerated in Patigi In 1898 by establishing a separate emirate out of Bida's[26] Fulbe emirate by the British colonial administration in Bida. The practice may have been dying down or reduced to the barest minimum, perhaps due to the influence of Islamic religion and western culture However, it is a convention in the writting of Nupe political history to begin with the name Tsoede. "This convention has been current at least since the early years of colonial rule, when we find Tsoede or Edegi as he is also called, being credited with the founding of kingdom whose successive rulers can be traced up to the present. The clearest expression of the place of both Tsoede and the king lists which his name heads comes from the standard study of Nupe society. Sheshi[27] explains that the early history of Nupe centers on the figure of Tsoede or Edegi, the cultural hero and mythical founder of the Nupe kingdom. The genealogies of the Nupe kings which are presented in many places in Nupe country, which have also found their way into the earliest written records of Nupe history which were compiled by "Mohammedan" scholars and court historians, place his birth in the middle of the fifteenth century. If we are to consider the evolution of the Tsoede story, the first account we know of that refers to the question of Nupe origins is that of Clapperton. Among the documents which were included with his papers was an Arabic manuscript which translated, thus: Baikie's information is even more tentative. His kinglist begins with one Tsoede a name as much like Tsoede as either Thoodyar or Shorgede.[28]

Another account has it that, based on the traditional brotherly relationship between Igala and Nupe, the exchange of occasional visits used to be the practice between, the two areas. It was in this process, as the tradition goes, that a prince from Idah called Aliyu most probably the same as Ayangba earlier mentioned, became a regular visitor to Nku in Nupeland as Tsoede might have been to Idah in Igala land. The prince is said to have become very close to Etsu Nku's daughter-princess Mama. Traditions differ on the nature of the closeness. One state that the Idah prince got married to the Nku princess and the marriage was blessed with a son called Saba or Mohammed Saba[29], but later Tsoede, while the other believes that there was no marriage between the two. That the Idah prince, being a hunter and magician was approached by the princess, when she became pregnant, to pray for her to have surviving child(ren) after having lost all her previous six children. The Idah prince obliged. The first-tradition appears more popular and generally acceptable to the Nupe and Igala.

In each case, however, it is generally an accepted tradition that the prince prepared a charm with an instruction which he gave to the pregnant princess when he was leaving Nupe for Idah on the news of his father's sickness. Prince 'Aliyu' succeeded his father as the new Attah of Igala after the former Attah's death. But to what extent can these claim stand as historical facts cannot be determined. Rivers, Niger and Kaduna provide easy access between the two areas and traffic on the two rivers meant human contacts as well as trade and commerce.[30]

Early Religion of The Nupe People

However, it is to be noted that there hardly existed in pre-Islamic Nupe a special collective name for their religion. According to Nadel[31], they have names for particular conceptions and local ceremonies. As for the

total creed it can be described only as being concerned with *Soko* (God) and not with the deities named differently. Also prior to the introduction of foreign religions, Islam and Christianity, traditional religious practices were the prominent belief system in conjunction with magic *Chigbe* and rituals *Kutizhi* which regulated people's life in most ramification politically, socially, culturally and economically. The deities or cults served as intermediaries between human and the super natural being *Soko*.[32]Meanwhile, it needs to be pointed out that despite the worship of different cults in Nupe of old, the fact remained that the people believed in the existence of a super natural Being who was the creator of everything. They called the being *Soko* God, whom they believed resided in the sky. It was believed that God decided to leave this earth for the skies following disobedience by mankind which angered him.

The socio-cultural practices among the Nupe just as it is with other groups can be said to have been as old as their history. Evolution of such practices might have been an attempt to solve both individual and general problems of existence very much related to the environment in which they found themselves. In achieving this, resort was made to the institutionalization of religious belief systems centered on cults and rituals.

Islam is the predominant religion in Nupeland, though Christianity is a common religion in very few communities where the pioneer activities of missionaries were recorded. Traditional religion was practised before the introduction of Islam. Therefore, traditional religion is no longer recognised nor practiced in Nupeland. Where such practices still occur, there is no societal recognition and practitioners are in secrecy due to shame, isolation and degrading status and the condemnation which practitioners are likely to face. Therefore, Islam is undoubtedly the predominant religion in the entire Nupeland with Christianity as the other religion practised by a lower proportion of the population. Hence, the majority of Nupe people have their culture altered with the introduction and acceptance of Islam.[33]The Nupe culture contained certain practices which when viewed from Islamic perspective were good and some which were bad. Those customs that were consistent with Islamic values were preserved and those that were contrary to Islamic principles were rejected. For example, the local custom recognizes the right and consent of the parents or guardians in the marriage of their children, Islam recognizes such aspects of the culture. But if on the other hand, the local custom encourages illicit relationship between sexes or other degrading practices which are unacceptable in Islam, such cultural norms or practices are rejected.

In all aspects therefore, religion whether indigenous or foreign, occupied a center stage in all ramifications of people's ways of life. This is captured in the various ways the concept of religion is defined. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary[34], religion is defined as the belief in the existence of a god (God) or gods and the activities that are connected with the worship of them. Nadel[2] sees religion as "all beliefs and practices implying communication with and control of the supernatural whether this is attempted through appeals and prayers to some transcendental intelligence. However, as to the word religion in Nupe language, there appears to be none. Anywhere in Nupe land today, the name *Adini* is what is referred to or regarded as religion. The Nupe have various traditions in common. Much of their culture was however diluted by the 19th century Jihad led by Usman Danfodio, even though they to some extent still hold unto some of their cultural value.[35]

Cultural Identity

The Nupe people are called different names by various tribes in Nigeria. For example, the Yoruba refer to them as Takpa, the Hausas call them Nufawa (Plural) or Banufe (Singular). Gwaris refer to them as Anupeyi. The Nupe people refer to themselves as Nupecizi (Plural) and Nupeci (Singular). The Nupe comprises other related ethnic groups or sub-tribes namely; Beni, Benu, Kusopa, Dibo, Gana-Gana, Kakanda, Basa, Cekpan, Kede, and Kupa.[36]

Characteristics of Nupe people

Nupe people have diverse physical characteristics in relation to body appearance. Some are tall; others are of medium and short heights. Some people are very light, others are light and majority are dark skinned while some are extremely dark. Interestingly, a mixture of fat, but not too many obese people, is common; though, there are fat and strong agile looking people too. A minority are lanky and slim-shaped. Also, within the social and political engineering of Nigerian nation, the Nupe people have come along way. Apart from the historic feat of the founders of Nupe Kingdom, the present generations have continued to blaze the trail.[37]

Conclusion

Finally, while the Tsoede legend might have probably been embellished with the passage of time, as such myths are, it is suggested that the external evidence shows that there is nothing inherently improbable in it.

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This may be premised on the fact that there was certainly contact between Nupe and Igala. According to Nadel , "the ancient contact of Idah and Nupe as well as the former sovereignty of Idah are undoubtedly historical". The tradition of Tsoede is as well-known in Idah, as in Nupe. the foundation of Nupe kingdom. While we cannot easily dismiss the inter group relations based essentially on economic activities between the two areas prior to the establishment of Nupe and Igala kingdom respectively, it is difficult to assume that the latter influenced the emergence of the former. It appears doubtful, if by the early history of the Nupe, the Igala kingdom with its Attahship (to which tradition attached the emergence of Tsoede had ever emerged

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